



DECISION MEMO
TRAIL RIVER CABIN CONSTRUCTION AND BRIDGE REPLACEMENT
KENAI PENINSULA BOROUGH, ALASKA
SEWARD RANGER DISTRICT, CHUGACH NATIONAL FOREST
U.S. FOREST SERVICE

INTRODUCTION

The Seward Ranger District of the Chugach National Forest prepared this decision memo to document that these actions fit within identified categories, the analysis shows there are no extraordinary circumstances, and the actions will not have significant effects. The responsible official is Francisco B. Sanchez, Seward District Ranger.

BACKGROUND AND LOCATION

The Trail River Campground is adjacent to Kenai Lake on the Kenai Peninsula, about 100 miles south of Anchorage and five miles south of the community of Moose Pass. Trail River Road leaves the Seward Highway at mile marker 24 and provides access to the campground and associated day use area.

The campground and day use area are especially popular destinations in the warmer months and the campground is one of the most heavily used on the Seward Ranger District. The area is close to many recreational opportunities including boating, fishing, hiking, biking and hunting. The campground roads are not plowed in the winter and they are informally groomed for skiing, which is enjoyed especially by nearby residents.

Trail River Bridge was constructed in 1965 to provide access from the Seward Highway to the Trail River Campground. The timber structure bridge is 55 years old, which is beyond the normal life expectancy of a timber road bridge. There is concern that the bridge may not have the necessary strength to support full highway design loads required for Forest Service road bridges on roads open to the public.

Public use recreation cabins are a major part of the forest recreation program. Currently, the Seward Ranger District manages 17 backcountry public use cabins. The most accessible of these cabins require a 3-mile hike. Others require a longer journey, while some are only accessible by float plane. The Seward Ranger District is lacking front-country, or road-accessed, public use cabins. Front-country cabins are accessible to more people, some who may not have the physical abilities or desire to hike or travel long distances over rugged terrain to access cabins. An accessible cabin provides a different experience than a campground: while still rustic, a cabin comes with a heat source, provides more shelter from the elements, enables you to sleep off the ground and is just generally more comfortable.

PROPOSED ACTION

There are two primary proposed actions: replacement of the Trail River Road bridge and construction of a public use cabin immediately adjacent to Trail River Campground. The alphanumeric identifiers in this section reference some forest plan desired conditions and management approaches that are addressed by these actions.

Replacement of Trail River Road Bridge:

The replacement bridge will be a pre-stressed reinforced concrete structure that will span the entire distance across the river. The new bridge will not require a pier in the middle of the river, so the existing concrete pier, which generates ongoing maintenance issues related to drift accumulation, will be removed. Bridge abutments will be slightly offset from the existing abutments by less than 10 feet, so the planned bridge will be approximately in the same location as the existing bridge. Some earthwork will be required on each end of the bridge, but significant cut and fill will not occur. Bridge foundations will be new cast-in-place concrete abutments on the existing shallow bedrock on both sides of the river.

Replacement of this bridge will mitigate risks to public health and safety by bringing the bridge substructure, deck, and rail system into compliance with new national bridge standards and will allow for full and continued access to the campground and day use area. Replacement of the deteriorating bridge will also improve aquatic habitat (FW-GL2-INFRA-DC-1 and FW-INFRA-MAP).

Construction of Public Use Cabin:

The proposed cabin site sits on a bluff above Kenai Lake, to the west of the day use area (see map). The area is within a mixed hardwood and deciduous forest that has had vegetation treatments in the past.

The cabin will be a 15'x17' Panabode style log cabin with loft. The Seward Ranger District has one other such cabin at Trout Lake that is used by a diverse group of recreators and favored by larger groups. It will have a wood stove, a kitchen counter, and a table with benches. The cabin will have bunk space for seven guests with additional sleeping space on the floor. This layout will help to accommodate the larger user groups expected at this cabin.

The cabin will include an access ramp and 12'x15' deck overlooking Kenai Lake. The cabin, recreation site and trails will meet Forest Service accessibility requirements, including

Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Standards, Forest Service Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Guidelines, and Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines, as applicable. The deck will have a partially covered roof to provide a dry area in inclement weather. It will include railings, an L shaped bench and small table.

A 4-6' wide hardened gravel trail will provide access from the cabin to the toilet. The outhouse will be a new standard cement vault toilet.

There is an overgrown temporary road that accesses the general area of the proposed cabin from the back of the Spruce loop in the campground. This road would be used as an access point for the maintenance and servicing of the toilet and will be brushed and improved accordingly to facilitate pumping service. Potable water and trash services will be available within the campground during the summer-season only. Cabin users will be expected to provide their own water and heat sources and pack out all trash in the fall, winter and spring.

An access trail of approximately 300 ft. will be constructed between the cabin parking and the cabin. Another 150 ft. trail and stairway will be constructed between the bluff and the lake. The cabin access trail will be 4-6 ft. wide hardened gravel. The lake trail will require the removal of some spruce and hardwood trees. In addition, there will be some selective cutting done to enhance the view of the lake from the cabin. The parking area will accommodate two vehicles and will be signed as reserved for "cabin users only." For off-season parking, the Forest Service is working with the Kenai Peninsula Borough to identify a site for construction of a small parking lot on borough land approximately one mile from the cabin, at the USFS gate that is closed in the winter. This lot will accommodate approximately six cars and provide parking for those who hike, bike, ski or snowshoe to the cabin in the winter.

The cabin will provide a new way to connect people with this natural area and the Forest Service is pursuing partnership opportunities for cabin construction (FW-GL1-ER-DC-2 and FW-SOCIALPO-MAP).

DECISION

After careful consideration of public input, the recommendations of appropriate resource specialists, and the requirements of applicable laws and regulations, I have decided to authorize implementation of the proposed action as it is described above.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable categories of actions are identified in agency procedures as:

- 36 CFR 220.6 (e)(22): Construction, reconstruction, decommissioning, or disposal of buildings, infrastructure, or improvements at an existing recreation site, including infrastructure or improvements that are adjacent or connected to an existing recreation site and provide access or utilities for that site; and
- 36 CFR 220.6(e)(23): Road management activities on up to 8 miles of NFS roads and associated parking areas.

These categories are applicable because the cabin to be constructed is immediately adjacent to an existing recreation site (the campground) with access through the existing site. The bridge reconstruction is considered “road management” on an existing NFS road and does not include new construction or realignment of a road.

I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis or documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

- Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species – There are no federal listed species or their critical habitat within the analysis area. There are no Chugach National Forest Species of Conservation Concern within the project area.
- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds – There are no extraordinary circumstances from this project related to floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds. The Trail River bridge replacement occurs within the Trail River floodplain and is adjacent to riverine wetlands. Because the bridge is designed to accommodate 100-year flood events, will be located in the existing footprint, and implementation incorporates best management practices to protect water quality, there will be minimal to no effects on floodplain or wetland resources. No municipal watersheds exist within the project area.
- Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas – None present in the project area.
- Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas – None present in the project area.
- Research natural areas – None present in the project area.
- American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites –The Area of Potential Effects was surveyed for both the cabin project and bridge replacement, and no cultural resources were identified. The proposed action was shared with the Kenaitze Indian Tribe in February 2020 with a follow up in May 2021 and the tribe provided no feedback or comments.
- Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas – The proposed project would cause no effect to historic properties (36 CFR 800.4(d)(1)). The bridge is over 50 years old, and a Determination of Eligibility has been prepared and submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), in which the bridge is determined not eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. SHPO concurrence for the bridge is expected by the end of September 2021. While work on the cabin site is expected to begin in 2021, work on the bridge is not expected to begin until 2022 and will not begin before the Forest Service receives concurrence from SHPO. The survey and project are documented in the Heritage Database as this project falls within the “*2017 Programmatic Agreement Among the USDA Forest Service, Alaska Region, The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer Regarding Heritage*”

Program Management on National Forests in the State of Alaska,” Streamlined Procedures, and will be included in the 2021 Annual Report to SHPO.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This action was listed as a project on the Chugach National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) and updated periodically during the analysis.

A scoping letter including this and two other Seward Ranger District projects was published on our public website and distributed to potentially interested or affected parties on February 14, 2020. Included in the distribution list were local property and business owners, the Seward Nordic Ski Club, local Tribal governments, Kenai Fjords National Park, and natural resource managers with the State of Alaska. Seven respondents provided comments related to this proposal. Comments were generally supportive, though one commenter was concerned that a new public use cabin could negatively impact local lodging businesses. Many commenters had specific questions and suggestions for refining the proposed action. No issues were identified that would result in additional alternatives or that could not be addressed through refinement of the proposal. The biggest addition to the project, originating from both external comments and internal conversation, was the decision to construct a small parking area to accommodate the anticipated need for increased winter parking for cabin users and those who ski and otherwise recreate on the campground roads in the winter.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This proposal implements the 2020 Chugach Forest Plan and is consistent with applicable plan components. This project is consistent with other applicable laws and regulations, including but not limited to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. The project record contains details for these findings.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

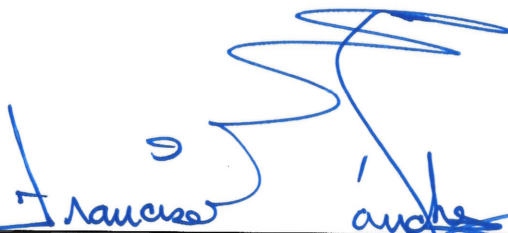

This decision is not subject to the appeal or objection processes. Implementation of this decision may occur immediately. Some trail construction and site work around the cabin area is expected to begin in September 2021, with the majority of the cabin construction occurring in 2022. Bridge replacement is expected to begin on or after the spring of 2022. Bridge replacement will not begin until the Forest Service has received documentation of SHPO concurrence with its findings.


CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact Jesse Labenski, Recreation Staff Officer, Seward Ranger District at jesse.labenski@usda.gov or (907) 288-3178 or Francisco B. Sanchez, Seward District Ranger, at 907-288-7730.

Additional information about this decision also can be found on the Chugach National Forest web page at:

www.fs.usda.gov/projects/chugach/landmanagement/projects.

  Sept 8th, 2021

FRANCISCO B. SANCHEZ
District Ranger  Date

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410, or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



PROJECT DESIGN FEATURES

Ecology/Vegetation:

- All gear, tools, vehicles, and equipment will be cleaned and free of all plant materials, soil, and slugs and slug eggs prior to entering National Forest lands or when moving between sites on National Forestlands.
- All heavy equipment will be inspected by a qualified USFS employee for plant materials, soil, and slugs and slug eggs prior to entering National Forest lands. The [DOI Technical Memorandum No. 86-68220-07-05: Inspection and Cleaning Manual for Equipment and Vehicles to Prevent the Spread of Invasive Species](#) should be provided to contractors prior to implementation to provide clear guidance for equipment cleaning.
- All mineral materials, topsoil and straw or hay erosion control products used will be certified as weedfree under the State of Alaska's Division of Agriculture weed free certification program.
- Limit vegetation clearing or disturbance when and where possible. Limit the time materials are stored in staging areas to reduce the potential damage to native vegetation.
- Avoid working in or near known invasive plant infestations, especially where invasive plants have gone to seed as these seeds can contaminate gear and be spread to other sites.

Terrestrial Wildlife:

- Avoid vegetation clearing, site preparation, or other vegetation removal activities during the breeding season of migratory birds from May 1 – July 15. (MOU between U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service to Promote Conservation of Migratory Birds (2008).
- If aircraft is utilized for flying in supplies and materials, for protection of mountain goats, Dall sheep and other wildlife:
 - Aircraft shall not hover, circle, or harass any species of wildlife in any way.
 - Aircraft will maintain a 1,500-foot minimum vertical distance from all observed mountain goats or Dall sheep.
 - Two known eagle nests in project vicinity (near the shoreline of Trail River close to where it enters Kenai Lake--see wildlife report in the project record for location map). While the planned cabin location and bridge replacement are outside the 660' required buffer avoidance zone, if aircraft is utilized, avoid operating aircraft within 1,000 feet of an active nest during breeding season (March 1 through August 31). (U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service. 2007. National Bald Eagle Management Guidelines.)
- Newly installed vault toilet(s) will have screens on vent pipes to prevent entrapment of birds and small mammals.
- If any raptor nests are discovered during project implementation, the KPZ Wildlife Biologist will be notified and appropriate action taken to minimize effects of the project activities on species.
- Human and pet food, garbage, and odorous attractants (fuel) should be attended by humans or stored

in a bear resistant manner when not being used (bear cans or lockers, containment barrels or inside of vehicles). Trash receptacles installed in parking areas will be a bear resistant/proof design. Garbage will be removed frequently to prevent overflow of trash.

Fisheries:

- Bridge removal and replacement should occur between May 15 and July 15, ADF&G's "Fish timing window" for instream work in Southcentral Alaska.